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ABSTRACT

The suggestion is made that the flood of middle-aged women who have recently turned away from traditional approaches to achievement may have shifted their orientation to changing options, but have always had a great desire to achieve. The effect of the changing values of the women's movement is discussed, and a grid of achievement motivation components that includes the mode, the approach, and the arena of achievement is described in terms of 24 components that may be summed, averaged or considered separately. A developmental progression for women with high achievement motivation is detailed along with the influence of family continuity. (JAC)

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ACHIEVEMENT ORIENTATION IN MIDDLE-AGED AND OLDER WOMEN

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, CA, August 1981.

Achievement orientation in middle-aged and older women*

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Over the past few decades, there have been remarkable changes in middle-aged women's achievement behavior. At least, we have seen changes in their employment behavior. Such changes can be interpreted in more than one way. They could be changes in personality that accompany aging, for instance. Post-child rearing women could be reverting to the interests of their pre-child rearing days. Or, they could be adaptations to changing historical circumstances which now provide a wider array of options to women.

The psychological pendulum is swinging back to functional interpretations of development instead of the structural theories of the recent past. Changes in cognitive functioning often attributed to loss of ability are now being reevaluated as possible accommodations to shifting life circumstances. The kinds of problem-solving techniques appropriate to the life demands of youth may be inappropriate to those of later years. In a similar fashion, it could be more important to be stereotypically feminine at 20 than at 60. I am postulating a functional approach to shifts in women's achievement orientation.

For a while, psychologists seemed to be avoiding the study of achievement motivation in women. We were apparently put off by the paradoxes of development from the age of 12 to the age of 20. Adolescent girls just don't show the same kind of meaningful correlations between achievement--in school, that is--and scores on achievement tests that adolescent boys do. These same psychologists would really throw up their hands if they had to make sense of women's development in this area from 20 to 60!

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* Presented at Symposium on Middle-aged and Older Women and Achievement, at the American Psychological Association meeting, Los Angeles, 8/26/81

In 1959, Stivers reported that the higher girls' achievement motivation scores, the less they seemed to want to achieve in school, or go to college. Today, this might translate into not wanting to go to graduate school. Instead, these girls who scored high on N Ach seemed to want to get married as soon as possible. Although we might prefer to interpret this as a cohort or period effect--these girls were not yet touched by the changing values of the Woman's Movement--the recent data I have seen do not show widespread changes. Or maybe I mean profound changes. What I think we are witnessing is expansion of norms and options, not necessarily transformation of desires. High school and college students today differ from their mothers mainly in hoping to combine career, husband, and children, often by some kind of magical means that will provide time, support, and child care when needed; but if anything has to give, career goes out first.

Just seven years after Stivers publication, Rhoda Baruch (1966) found that women in their thirties and forties, who had been patently disinterested in academic/occupational achievement when they were college students fifteen years earlier, were now oriented back to the occupational perspectives of their girlhood. What can we make of this, particularly since men's attitudes don't shift like this? One possibility I would like to examine is that women are demonstrating more than one aspect of achievement orientation. In a way, we women can consider ourselves lucky in being able to adopt more than one route to satisfy our goals. Rather than underline our victim role, we might emphasize our ability to exhibit developmental diversity. This position fits a life-span perspective, of course, better than it does a perspective in which development ends at 20.

To test such an hypothesis, we need measures that can show complexity if it exists. A single kind of achievement motivation score, based either

upon desire to excel in school or job or to be recognized as excellent by others will not do. Neither will a limited definition of success: educational or vocational. For this purpose, I developed a grid (see Figure 1) of achievement motivation components that includes the mode of achievement, the approach to achievement, and the arena of achievement. The four modes are a wish to achieve through 1) task mastery--wanting to do whatever you do as well as you can; 2) recognition or status; 3) interpersonal influence; and 4) creativity--wanting to add something new to the world.

I consider two approaches to achieving or wanting to achieve, one direct and the other indirect. In the direct approach, one would want to do well in one's own undertakings, be recognized for one's own good work, have direct influence over other people, or be creative in one's own endeavors. In the indirect approach, one would want to get a feeling of success from the good work of others, from the recognition given affiliated others, from the interpersonal influence of affiliated others, or from the creations of others. These others would, in the case of many women, be their husband or children.

Finally, the arena in which one might want to achieve could be in: a) home or community--the traditional woman's arena; b) traditional women's jobs like secretary, nurse, or teacher; or 3) what Tangri and others have called "innovative" or "masculine" jobs.

This 4x2x3 grid yields 24 components which may be summed, averaged, or considered separately. A sum, average, or peak score could be used as an index of level of overall achievement motivation, for example, allowing us to test the hypothesis that level of motivation might remain constant over life,

with shifts in mode, approach, or arena at various times. A variety of combinations of components can be observed, as suggested in Figure 1. Julia Childs is an example of achievement in the creativity mode, in a direct approach, and in a traditional home and community sphere. Bella Abzug is an example of achievement in the interpersonal influence mode, in a direct approach, and in an innovative arena. You can find your own examples for each of the 24 cells of the grid.

Let us consider the following possible developmental progression for women with high achievement motivation, starting with a finding by Pierce (1960) that there is a small but consistent correlation between high achievement motivation scores of high school girls and their orientation toward marriage. At least in 1960, high school girls who wanted to succeed could do so most directly by marrying--marrying well, of course. Such achievement could be either in the mode of recognition or interpersonal influence. In either event, the approach is direct and the arena traditional. Once married, these young women might also express high achievement orientation through the mode of task mastery--by being outstanding housekeepers, or even through the mode of creativity--by being gourmet cooks or outstanding home decorators. When they have children, they can achieve in at least three modes: task-mastery--showing how good a mother they are; recognition--raising admirable children; and interpersonal influence--children are usually very good for this, at least in their early years. Several years later, these same high N Ach women could shift their mode, approach, or arena to more occupation/academic pursuits.

In 1974, An Switzer used this scheme to assess the four achievement motivation modes in women's responses to open-ended interviews. The 300

women in the sample ranged in age from 12 to 92 and represented 100 family lines: grandmothers, their daughters, and their granddaughters. Her findings are shown in Figure 1 and Table 1. Figure 2 shows the generational means for the four modes and for the sum of these four mode scores. These findings are to be considered very preliminary. They are not longitudinal so that we cannot make any statements about shifts in women of any one generation over their life. We also cannot compare across the four modes because the coding is not equivalent. It may be that task mastery is the preferred mode, but we have no real basis for saying so. What we can say is that, to the extent that the sum of the modes represents total achievement, there is a linear generational progression. The youngest generation shows the highest achievement orientation and the oldest generation the least. Whether this is an age or an historical effect, we have no way of knowing. The pattern for task mastery is the same as that for total achievement. In fact, the youngest generation wants to achieve more than the two older in three of the four modes. Only in interpersonal influence is it the lowest. The middle generation would like to achieve through influencing others. So would the oldest generation, though to a lesser extent. Can we say that until the most recent generation of women, the chief way for most women to achieve was through others? If we had coded directness or indirectness of achievement, and arena, we might see some other striking generational differences.

These generational differences are set within a framework of some family continuity, as can be seen in Table 1. Both mother-daughter pairs tend to be alike in their orientation toward task mastery. A mother who wants to do everything she does well is likely to have a daughter who wants to do everything she does well. There is also some family resemblance in orientation

toward creativity, although just for the two younger generations. These family interrelations contrast with the more cohort or time-of-life related orientations toward interpersonal power.

The title of this paper is achievement orientation of middle-aged and older women. How can we summarize these remarks to apply to the title? I have made several points. First, that the flood of middle-aged women who turned away from traditional arenas and approaches for achievement in recent years may have shifted in their orientation to adapt to changing life circumstances and options, but have always had a high level of desire to achieve. After all, not all women returned to school or work, and among those who did are many whose motive for achievement was not a determining factor. Second, there is some suggestion that the expanded options and changed norms have led to a higher level of motivation in the youngest generation than in their mothers and grandmothers. But we do not know whether the next generation to come along will be that high. Third, the preferred mode of achievement could shift both with age and life circumstance and with opportunity.. Will the young women who now want task mastery and recognition shift to wanting interpersonal power in middle age? Will the phenomenon of midlife women returnees to educational/occupational arenas that has been such a common feature of our cultural scene vanish with the imminent changes in conditions we are foreseeing for the future?

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Figure 1

Expression of achievement motivation in women

Achievement Concepts

Mode	*Achievement as Task Mastery*	*Achievement as Recognition or Status*	*Achievement as Interpersonal Influence*	*Achievement as Creativity*
Direct Home and Community	Good housekeeper—clean, efficient, skilled	Best-dressed woman Beauty queen	PTA president	Gourmet cook House decorator
Traditional "feminine" job	Fast typist Good classroom manager	Secretary of top executive Principal	Social worker	Artist
Innovative "masculine" job	Skilled surgeon Successful lawyer	Dean of college Popular magazine writer	Executive in industry	College professor Theoretical writer
Indirect	Husband good salesman or financially successful	Expensive house in exclusive suburb	Wife of powerful political person	Patron, "angel"

FIGURE 1

Generational Differences in Achievement Motivation Components

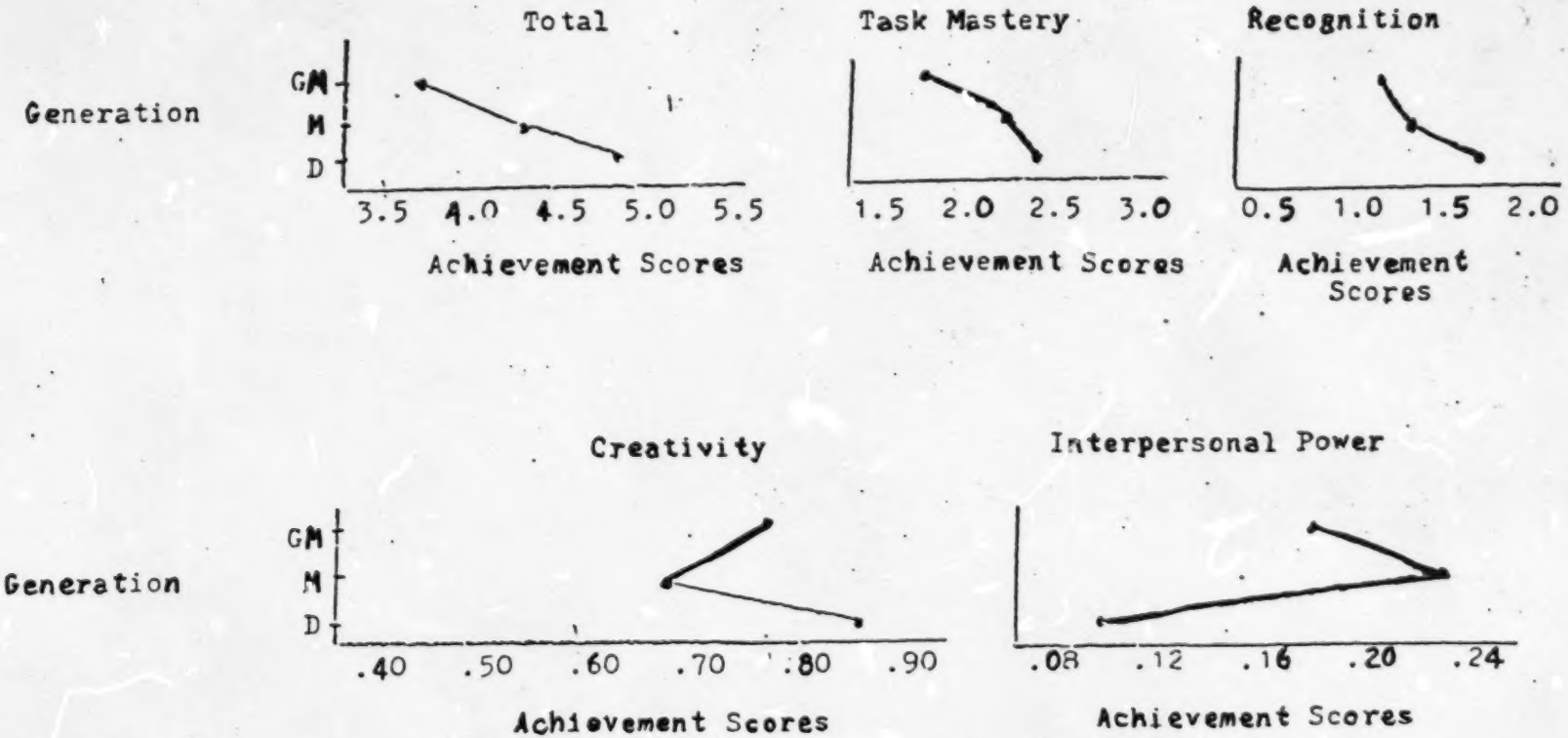

Table 1
Intercorrelations Among Components of Achievement Motivation by Generation

	Task Mastery	Recognition	Interpersonal power	Creativity
$G_1 - G_2$	.44*	.10	-.05	.21
$G_2 - G_3$	.25*	.07	.09	.47*
$G_1 - G_3$	.25*	.19*	.08	.09